

# The Essays of Elia

by Helen Beach Smith

*January, 1909*

Submitted to the Department of English of the  
University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Master Thesis

Smith, Helen Beach 1909

The "Essays of Elia".



The "Essays of Elia."

Thesis presented to the department of English  
Literature of the University of Kansas, for the degree  
of Master of Arts.

January, 1909.

Helen Beach Smith.

## B I B L I O G R A P H Y .

Lamb, Charles.

"Works," ed. by William Macdonald. Vol. I.

New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1903.

Lamb, Charles and Mary.

"Works," ed. by E. V. Lucas. Vol. II.

London, Methuen & Co., 1903.

Ainger, Alfred.

"Life of Charles Lamb," in "English Men of Letters" Series.

New York, Harper Bros., 1882.

Dobell, Bertram.

"Sidelights on Charles Lamb."

Lucas, E. V.

"Life of Charles Lamb," Vol. I.

London, Methuen & Co.

Adams, W. H.

"Lamb's Essays of Elia," in Famous Books.



B I B L I O G R A P H Y .

(continued.)

Cornwall, Barry.

"Charles Lamb, a Memoir."

London, Edward Moxon & Co., 1806.

Rhys, Ernest.

Introduction in "Essays of Elia."

London, Walter Scott ed. and pub.

## I N D E X .

Introduction-----	pp. 1- 3
Chief Characteristics of Lamb-----	pp. 3- 6
His Family-----	pp. 6- 8
The Personal in his Essays-----	pp. 8-10
List of the "Essays of Elia"-----	pp. 10-11
Publication of the Essays-----	pp. 11-12
Discussion of the "Essays of Elia"-----	pp. 12-36
Conclusion-----	p. 36

"THE ESSAYS OF ELIA."

No writer's name, perhaps, is better known to English readers than that of Charles Lamb; and of all his works no part is so widely read, or so universally loved as the "Essays of Elia." I am well aware that the subject of this paper is not a new one. Lamb, as an essayist, and especially as he appears in the character of "Elia" has been the subject of much literary study and research. It is my purpose, however, not merely to sum up the opinions of others, but to give the results of a careful study of the essays themselves, aided by references in point of facts, to some of the most reliable sources.

I have read the comments of such men as William J. Courthope, Alfred Ainger, and others, and I shall quote from these authors in the course of the paper. I have divided my subject into several parts, as I have deemed it necessary, and shall first discuss briefly the character of the author as is shown by a general survey of the essays as a whole. Later, I intend to devote some time to the study of each particular essay, giving the occasion of its publication with an attempt at the interpretation of its subject matter.

I.

There is as wide a difference between writers in the field of the essay, as in any other division of literature. There are essays which are impersonal, and are valued merely for their style and subject matter. On the other hand, there are essays in which we may read not only the author's opinion on the subject in hand but may come to know his emotions, his character, his very personality itself. The essays of Addison belong to the first type; entertaining, instructive, brilliant to be sure, but cold and impersonal. The "Essays of Elia" belong to the second, and it is in these essays that we see the personality of Lamb revealed in all its peculiar, yet sweet, character.

Lamb has only one prose work by which he is remembered--or rather one group of prose work--"The Essays of Elia,"--together with "The Last Essays of Elia." Others have written for the public, shielded by a fictitious name, but in "The Essays of Elia," we have the history of Charles Lamb, with his aims and his ambitions, his sorrows and his trials, his joys and his comforts, all colored by his peculiar and marvellous personality. As his biographer, Alfred Ainger has said:--"One might as well seek to account for the perfume of lavender, or the flavor of quince." ("Life" in "English Men of Letters" series)

First of all, as a writer, Lamb is discursive. It is not merely "Old China" of which he writes, but old things--whatever they may be. "The South Sea House" gives him an opportunity--as do many of his other essay subjects--to tell something of his own life and family. He is not like the garrulous old woman who begins her conversation by mentioning a fact which she never touches again, but he is discursive in a most pleasing and delightful way. While we are kept aware all the time, of his main subject, we are also led unconsciously to luxuriate in the inexhaustible riches of the author's mind.

But it is not merely from a literary point of view that this fact is interesting. It is an indication of a certain element in the life--the character--of the man. His is a personality difficult to describe--it is elusive--almost, we might say, changeable; yet it is the same Charles Lamb that we see in all his work. His mind and heart are open to everything, and while he has his preferences, yet he gives full sweep to his feelings and interests.

The second fact that we learn of the character of Lamb in his essays is his humanity. He loves mankind. While he had no family of his own--no one who was intimately connected with him throughout life except his faithful Sister Mary, his friends were many. In the very titles of his essays we see that they deal with men, and

the affairs of men,--for example--"On the Acting of Munden," "Distant Correspondents," "The Praise of Chimney-sweepers." He loved and sympathized with all humanity, he understood the weaknesses of us all, and we of today can feel this sympathy when we read his pages. Then it is that we see something of what it would have meant to have had Charles Lamb for a friend.

A few illustrations will show this quality. "Shut not thy purse strings always against painted distress. Act a charity sometimes. When a poor creature (outwardly and visibly such) comes before thee, do not stay to inquire whether the 'seven small children' in whose name he implores thy assistance, have a veritable existence.-----If he be not all that he pretendeth, give, and under a personate father of a family, think (if thou pleasest) that thou hast relieved an indigent bachelor.---You pay your money to see a comedian feign these things, which concerning these poor people, thou canst not certainly tell whether they are feigned or not." ("Complaint of the Decay of Beggars" in "Essays of Elia," pp. 239--240)

"When a child, what a mysterious pleasure it was to witness their operation! to see a chit no bigger than one's self, enter, one knew not by what process, into what seemed the fauces Averni--to pursue him in imagination, as he went sounding on through many dark, stifling caverns, horrid shades!--to shudder with the idea, that 'now, surely, he



must be lost forever!--to revive at hearing his feeble shout of discovered daylight--and then (O fulness of delight) running out of doors, to come just in time to see the sable phenomenon emerge in safety, the brandished weapon of his art victorious like some flag waved over a conquered citadel!--if thou meetest one of these small gentry in thy early rambles, it is good to give him a penny. It is better to give him twopence." (Praise of Chimney-Sweepers," pp. 217-218).

The next characteristic which I shall mention is his love for all that is old--for its own sake. He does not think of the amount of gold in a piece of jewelry, but rather of the history of its existence. He speaks with reverence, with real love--of "Old China," "the Old Schoolmaster," "the Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," "Some of the Old Actors," Not only in his choice of subjects is this tendency shown, but throughout his work, the passion--which is almost one of sentimentality--appears.

"What a place to be in is an old library!--the odor of their old moth-scented coverings is fragrant as the first bloom of those scintial apples which grew amid the happy orchard." (Oxford in the Vacation.)

I am even inclined to think that much of his respect for the Quakers is due to his love of the "old," for he says: "How far the followers of these good men in our days have kept to the primitive spirit, or in what proportion they have substituted formality for it, the Judge of Spirits

alone can determine." ("Quakers' Meeting")

Again he says: "What an antique air had the now almost effaced sundials, with their moral inscriptions, seeming coevals with that Time which they measured, and to take their revelations of its flight immediately from heaven, holding correspondence with the fountain of light!--so may the yonkers of this generation eye you, pacing your stately terrace, with the same superstitious veneration, with which the child Elia gazed on the Old Worthies that solemnized the parade before ye!" ("Old Benchers of the Inner Temple.")

The most important fact, however, in the revelation of character in these essays is this--the personal tone pervades the entire work. First I shall speak of this personal tone with regard to his family affairs. The story of his life is a sad one. The tragedy surrounding the death of his mother, the disappointing career of his brother "John," and the dreadful affliction which seized upon several members of the family and especially upon Lamb's favorite, Mary, need only be mentioned here. Of these sad events, and of his love for his relatives, he speaks in many of his essays.

In the essay "On the Old Benchers of the Inner Temple" Lamb gives us a characterization of "Lovel" in which many see the author's estimate of his own father. "I knew this Lovel. He was a man of an incorrigible and losing honesty. A good fellow withal, and 'would strike.' In the cause of

the oppressed he never considered inequalities, or calculated the number of his opponents.--I saw him in his old age and the decay of his faculties, palsy smitten, in the last stage of human weakness.--I have wished that sad second-childhood might have a mother still to lay its head upon her lap. But the common mother of us all in no long time after received him gently into hers."

In "Mackery End," Lamb discusses other members of the family, paying an especial tribute to his sister Mary, who is the "Bridget" of the "Elia" essays. "She was tumbled early, by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading, without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at will upon that fair and wholesome pasturage. Had I twenty girls, they should be brought up exactly in this fashion. I know not whether their chance in wedlock might not be diminished by it; but I can answer for it, that it makes (if the worst comes to the worst) most incomparable old maids."

In "My Relations" he speaks of his brother and sister in terms that convey the sacredness of family relations even when the object of love is not the most worthy; for in "James Elia" we certainly see much that we cannot admire.

"These are James and Bridget Elia. They are older than myself by twelve, and ten, years; and neither of them

seems disposed, in matters of advice and guidance, to waive any of the prerogatives which primo-geniture confers."--

"With all the strangenesses of the strangest of the Elias, I would not have him (James) in one jot or tittle other than he is; neither would I barter or exchange my wild kinsman for the most exact, regular, and every way consistent kinsman breathing."

The most striking, peculiar, and charming part of Lamb's character, I have not yet mentioned--the way in which he speaks of himself, Charles Lamb, under the cloak of "Elia." "He is an egoist without a grain of envy or ill-nature," says Mr. Ainger. It is the real Charles Lamb who is speaking in every case. He is not an egoist in a disagreeable sense at all. He tells, in fact, exactly what we would want him to tell, could we talk with him today; he gives us the facts about himself, of which we wish to be sure in our friends. Barry Cornwall says in his "Memoir"--(p. 163) "I see that they are genial, delicate, terse, full of thought and full of humour; that they are delightfully personal; and when he speaks of himself you cannot hear too much; that they are not imitations, but adoptions." The following quotation from Lucas (Vol.II, p. 50) tells exactly what is the feeling of lovers of Lamb, on this subject. "It is significant of Elia that

every one thinks he knows Lamb a little more intimately, and appreciates him a little more subtly than anyone else."

His was a sad life. He was a lonely man with a tragedy behind him, and with no bright future before him. Lamb never married, and his touching devotion to his sister is a part of the great romance of his life. After the death of his brother John he seemed more lonely than ever. It was about this time that he wrote that most touching and beautiful essay, "Dream Children," in which he gives us some glimpse of how lonely he really was. "Then I told how for seven long years, in hope sometimes, sometimes in despair, yet persisting ever, I courted the fair Alice W---n; and, as much as children could understand, I explained to them what coyness, and difficulty, and denial, meant in maidens--when suddenly turning to Alice, the soul of the first Alice looked out at her eyes with such a reality re-presentment, that I became in doubt which of them stood before me, or whose the bright hair was."

In "Christ's Hospital" he tells of his early school life. He knows and intends it to be so, that the reader interprets this and other essays as being true records of his own life. This very fact gives much of their charm to the essays.

So it is in all his work. There is no essay among them all that does not have in it the charm of the author's character; no essay in which we do not see the odd, whimsical man; quiet yet emotional, sad yet brilliant, in all his

loneliness, sadness and goodness. No one can read the "Essays of Elia" without feeling richer in a new friend, without being comforted, strengthened, and aroused to a new ambition and new hope; and above all, without making a new determination to recognize in all persons the ties of a common humanity.

## II.

To procure a list of the dates belonging to the essays contained in the first "Essays of Elia" is not difficult. The list which I give below is taken from the edition of MacDonald.

South Sea House-----	August, 1820
Two Races of Men-----	December, 1820
New Year's Eve-----	January, 1821
Mrs. Battle's Opinion on Whist-----	February, 1821
Chapter on Ears-----	March, 1821
All Fool's Day-----	April, 1821
Quakers' Meeting-----	April, 1821
The Old and New Schoolmaster-----	May, 1821
Valentine's Day-----	1819
Imperfect Sympathies-----	August, 1821
Witches and Other Night Fears-----	October, 1821
My Relations-----	June, 1821
Mackery End-----	July, 1821
Modern Gallantry-----	November, 1822
The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple	September, 1821
Grace Before Meat-----	November, 1821



My First Play-----	December, 1821
Dream Children-----	January , 1822
Distant Correspondents-----	March, 1822
Praise of Chimney Sweepers-----	May, 1822
Decay of Beggars-----	June, 1822
Disseration on Roast Pig-----	September, 1822
Bachelor's Complaint-----	September, 1822
(reprinted from the "Reflector" 1811)	
Some of the Old Actors-----	February, 1822
Artistic Comedy of the Last Cen-	
tury-----	April, 1822
The Acting of Munden-----	October, 1822

In 1823 the first volume of the so-called "Elia Essays" appeared under this title: "Elia--Essays that have appeared under that signature in the 'London Magazine'." The first essay contained material gathered when he was in his seventeenth year but was not written until he was forty-five. It is probably--I might better say perhaps--because of the pseudonym Lamb employed, that the essays are so rich, so free. As Lucas says, (Life of Charles Lamb, " Vol. I. p.43) "the mere invention must have put him in a merry pin."

He was given twenty guineas a sheet, with sixteen pages to a sheet, making as Lamb himself said, "one hundred seventy pounds for two years 'Elia'." Lamb had intended to write a preface to the volume when it was published, but changed his mind and in the next magazine put the "charac-

ter of the Late Elia" as a "Sort of Preface." This essay, however, was not published in the first volume but in the volume of 1833 called "Last Essays of Elia." The essays were, with no exceptions, published at some time in the "London Magazine." John Scott (1783-1821) was the first editor of this paper. Its first number appeared January, 1820, and Lamb's first contribution, in August of the same year.

1. The South Sea House was printed in the "London Magazine," August, 1820. Although several of the "Elia" essays were written before this one, yet it deserves to be ranked as the first among the "Essays of Elia." In this essay, Lamb, the man of forty-four writes of the experiences of the youth of seventeen, for it is probable that Lamb was not himself employed at the South Sea House longer than the twenty-three weeks in 1791. It is probable, however, that much of the material which he uses here he obtained while visiting his brother in later years.

Several places, important as land marks in the London of Lamb's day, are mentioned here. Among them are "Rosa-mond's pond," "Mulberry Gardens," and the "Conduit in Cheapside." The "Mulberry Gardens" are especially interesting as they were the result of a scheme on the part of James I to introduce silk-worms as an industry into England.

In the fourth paragraph (Lucas, p. 2.) Lamb takes up what Lucas calls his "Matter-of-lie" career. Here it is that he says:

"Living accounts and accountants puzzle me."

At the very time when Lamb was engaged in writing these essays, he was working in the Accountants' office of the India House, where he lived in a world of figures.

Mr. Lucas (p. 305) quotes from an article which he thinks must have been written by Scott, the editor of the London Magazine. Among other things the commentator says:

"How free from intolerance of every sort must the spirit be that conceived that paper,--or took off so fair and clear an impression from facts."

2. Oxford in the Vacation appeared October, 1820, and is dated at the end, "August 5, 1820. From my rooms facing the Bodleian."

Lucas says: "My own impression is that Lamb wrote the essay at Cambridge, under the influence of Cambridge, where he spent a few weeks in the summer of 1820, and transferred the scene to Oxford by way of mystification." (Lucas, p.309.)

However this may be, the essay is interesting, as showing how beautifully Lamb can "ramble" on when he chooses his own paths as he does here. He writes, pretending to be recording his impressions as he visits the deserted college. What memories, what possibilities does the scene call up to him! About half the essay is devoted to "D." or George Dyer who was one of Lamb's particular friends.

Among other beautiful passages in the essay, the address to Antiquity, found near the beginning, is one of the most striking. (Lucas, p.9)

"Antiquity! thou wondrous charm, what art thou? that, being nothing, art everything! When thou wert, thou wert not antiquity--then thou wert nothing, but hadst a remoter antiquity, as thou called'st it, to look back to with blind veneration."

The closing is characteristic of the writer. There is no summing up of points, no moralizing, no return to the original subject from which the author has digressed. He is talking of his friend "G. D." and with this he stops. Even the closing sentence seems strangely unfinished, as of lacking a proper completion.

"When he (D.) goes about with you to show you the halls and colleges, you think you have with you the Interpreter at the House Beautiful." (ed. Lucas, Vol. II. p. 12.)

### 3. Christ's Hospital, Five and Thirty Years Ago.

This essay contains much that is autogiographical. There is much in it, however, that belongs not to his life, but to the life of Coleridge who was two years his senior. The two boys entered school together in July of 1798. It is narrative and reminiscent, and tells the story of a lonely boy, who did not easily make friends, placed in a school among those who could not well understand and sympathize with such a temperament. In this point, the story is more that of Coleridge, than of Lamb.

This essay is one of the longest that Lamb has written. Just how much of what he reveals of the practices prevalent in this institution, is strictly true, is not certain, but

at any rate, if his purpose was to show the inhumanity of the treatment which the boys received here, he was surely most successful. The essay may be compared with another written on the same subject--"Recollections of Christ's Hospital," (Lucas, Vol. I) which gives a view not quite so sombre.

Lamb was at this school seven years, but on the half-holidays, he went to his home. If we are to believe that part to be autobiographical, he received better treatment than the rest of his comrades because of the nearness of his relatives. For this reason we know that such passages as this must refer to Coleridge, rather than to Lamb, himself. "I was a poor, friendless boy. My parents, and those who should care for me, were far away.--O the cruelty of separating a poor lad from his early homestead!" (Lucas, p. 13.)

Rather, we would believe such a passage as the following to refer to Lamb.

"he had his hot plate of roast veal, or the more tempting griskin (exotics unknown to our palates) cooked in the paternal kitchen (a great thing), and brought him daily by his maid or aunt." (Lucas, p. 13)

4. The Two Races of Men appeared December, 1820. The two races are, according to Lamb, the borrowers and the lenders. We see that Lamb had thought of this fact, before, from a letter he wrote to Wordsworth, in 1816. (Lucas, p. 324)

"I have not bound the poems yet. I wait till people

have done borrowing them.--For of those who borrow, some read slow, some mean to read but don't read; and some neither read nor meant to read, but borrow to leave you an opinion of their sagacity."

The essay is very short, and sticks more closely to the subject than Lamb's essays usually do. From the borrowing of things in general, and of money in particular, Lamb proceeds to the borrowing of books, which probably were the chief things he had to lend. His view of the matter is so natural, so appealing to those who have suffered, as he had from the onslaughts of the "borrowing" race, that this essay is an especially appealing one.

"C. will hardly allege that he knows more about the treatise than I do, who introduced it to him, and was indeed the first (of the moderns) to discover its beauties--but so have I known a foolish lover to praise his mistress in the presence of a rival more qualified to carry her off than himself." (Lucas, p. 20)

##### 5. New Year's Eve.

This is perhaps the most pessimistic of the essays, and for this reason, many objections were made to it by readers of the "London Magazine." Lamb begins by saying that "Every man hath two birthdays." From this statement he passes on to the (to him) melancholy emotions called up by the ringing of the bell at midnight on the eve of the New Year.

In this essay, as in so much of his work, Lamb brings



out his love for all that is old. "I am naturally, beforehand, shy of novelties; new books, new faces, new years." From here he passes on to a conjecture as to what shall come when life is ended. The whole tone is sad, and gloomy. The ending is entirely different. It closes with a hymn to "The New Year" and with many cheerful thoughts.

"And now another cup of the generous! and a merry New Year, and many of them, to you all, my masters!" (Lucas, p. 32)

#### 6. Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist.

In nearly all of Lamb's characters, we see a personage behind the name. Our first question is--who was the original? So it is in the case of the famous Mrs. Battle whose name is widely known, whether there is anything of her personality beyond the mere name or not. Lucas ( p.333, Vol. II) is inclined to believe that Lamb had in mind Mrs. Sarah Burney, although some think that she was no one else than Lamb's own grandmother, Mrs. Field.

However that may be, Lamb has given to Mrs. Battle her immortality. The essay deals in part with the technicalities of the game of whist, but is discursive, although not to so great an extent as is the rest of the volume. The whole essay is bright and pleasing, and especially is the beginning promising.

" 'A clear fire, a clean hearth, and the rigour of the game,' This was the celebrated wish of old Sarah Battle (now with God) who, next to her devotions, loved

a good game at whist."

The essay contains several allusions to Bridget Elia, the name under which Lamb speaks of his sister Mary throughout the whole series of essays. The first is as follows:

"When I am in sickness, or not in the best spirits, I sometimes call for the cards, and play a game at picquet for love with my cousin, Bridget--Bridget Elia."

# 7. A Chapter on Ears.

Lamb was not a music lover. In all his writing we do not find him anywhere dwelling on the beauties of music, whether of the human voice, or of the musical instrument. In this "Chapter" he tells us himself that he has "no ear" for it. In fact, after the introduction, he devotes the entire essay to telling what kind of music he dislikes most.

In the third paragraph we find the only instance of his mentioning any pleasure which he has, or ever did have, in music. It is where he tells of the songs "Water parted from the sea," and "In Infancy" which used to be sung to him at an old-fashioned "harpsicord" by Mrs. S----, "once the blooming Fanny Weatherall of the Temple--who had power to thrill the soul of Elia, small imp that he was, even in his long coats; and to make him glow, tremble, and blush with a passion, that not faintly indicated the day-spring of that absorbing sentiment, which was afterwards destined to overwhelm and subdue his nature quite, for Alice W-----n." (Macdonald, p. 75)

Again he says:

"Above all, those insufferable concertos, and pieces of music, as they are called, do plague and embitter my apprehension."

8. All Fools' Day is one of the brightest, wittiest little essays that Lamb or anyone else has ever written. It appeared April, 1821. The opening of the essay gains and holds the reader's admiration. - Lamb has a way of prejudicing his readers before-hand in his favor, so that they are in the mood to receive what he shall say.

"The compliments of the season to my worthy masters and a merry first of April to us all! Many happy returns of this day to you--and you--and you, sir--nay, never frown, man, nor put a long face upon the matter. Do not we know one another? What need of ceremony among friends?" (ed. Macdonald, p. 83)

In this essay, Lamb imagines a gathering together of such people as Empedacles, Cleombrotus, and Alexander. These people hold a "Fools' Banquet" at which each one is cheered and joked at by Lamb upon the particular whim of each. For instance:

"What, the magnanimous Alexander in tears?--cry, baby, put its finger in its eye, it shall have another globe, round as an orange, pretty moppet."

9. A Quaker's Meeting.

Lamb shows a love for the Quakers in many of his writings. There was much of the Quaker in Lamb; much in the Quakers

that strongly appealed to him. Whether it was the fact of their antiquity, or of their quiet natures, that struck his fancy, it is certain that his respect for them was genuine and great.

There is a dignity and a calm about Lamb that is found nowhere else just as it is here; and it is highly fitting the nature of his subject. He seems to have carefully chosen his words that he might select those which would be especially suiting to the character of these silent people of whom he writes. We find here that spirit of Lamb's that loved to be alone; that hated publicity; that was satisfied with the congenial society of his sister Mary, alone.

Speaking of solitude he says, "The perfect is that which he can sometimes attain in crowds, but nowhere so absolutely as in a Quaker's meeting.--In secular occasions, what so pleasant as to be reading a book through a long winter evening, with a friend sitting by,--say a wife--he, or she, too, (if that be probable) reading another, without interruption, or oral communication?--Give me--a sympathetic solitude." (Macdonald, pp. 89-91)

Again he says: "Their garb and stillness conjoined, present an uniformity, tranquil and herd-like--as in the pasture--'forty feeding like one'."

#### 10. The Old and the New Schoolmaster.

Lamb begins this essay, written, or at least printed, in 1821, by telling wherein he is lacking in the way of education. "In everything that relates to science, I am

a whole Encyclopaedia behind the rest of the world." From this he goes on to tell of the difficulties of conversing with a learned person, when one is so uncertain of one's own knowledge on the topics liable to be discusses. He then tells of his conversation with a school-master in a coach on the road between Bishopsgate and Shacklewell.

From the relation of a few incidents Lamb goes on to speak of the difference between the "old and new" school-master. "The modern schoolmaster is expected to know a little of everything, because his pupil is required not to be entirely ignorant of anything." How different, he says, is this condition from that in the time of the old Pedagogues, "who believing that all learning was contained in the languages which they taught, and despising every other acquirement as superficial and useless, came to their task as to a sport!" (Macdonald, pp. 101-102)

11. Valentine's Day. This essay was printed in the "Examiner" in 1819, and afterwards, in 1821, reprinted in the "Indicator."

It is on the ever-interesting subject of that saint which is the patron of lovers. "In other words, this is the day on which those charming little missives, ycleped Valentines, cross and intercross each other at every street and turning."

He tells the pleasing story of E. B. (known to be Edward Francis Burney) who sent to a young girl a beautiful valentine, in order to thus, unknown, be able to

repay her for the pleasure which she unknowing had given him watching her play about in her "innocence" and "joyousness."

The closing paragraph is in the spirit of the whole essay:

"Goodmorrow to my valentine, sings poor Ophelia; and no better wish, but with better auspices, we wish to all faithful lovers, who are not too wise to despise old legends, but are content to rank themselves humble diocesans of old Bishop Valentine, and his true church." (ed. Macdonald, p. 114)

12. Imperfect Sympathies.

This, with the exception of the "Dissertation on Roast Pig" is the best known of the "Essays." This is an analysis of Scotch character, in the main, although the essay is discursive, as usual, and speaks of much before and afterwards, that seems to have no direct bearing on the Scotch. This essay seems to be more carefully thought out than the rest, although it is free and not at all strained in its style. It shows a penetration, not always shown, which with the natural kindliness of his heart, makes a delightful combination.

It is probable that the essay was written from a desire on Lamb's part, to help his countrymen understand a little better, the characters of the Scotchmen between whom and themselves there was "imperfect sympathy." The few Scotchmen whom Lamb did know were among the most highly



admired of his acquaintances, and it may be to this fact that we owe this tribute to them. Among them was Thomas Hood, whom Lamb especially loved.

As Macdonald, himself a Scotsman, says in his notes (p. 303.): "This Essay is one of those little works of Lamb which are great masterpieces, and the only doubt is whether to describe them as classics of scientific analysis or instances of his imaginative mastery of a subject."

In seeming to dislike the Scots, Lamb shows that he has a respect for them, a sympathy for their point of view, which, while he may not always fully understand them, does none the less keep him in a friendly mood toward them.

"But I have always found that a true Scot resents your admiration of his compatriot even more than he would your contempt of him. The latter he imputes to your 'imperfect acquaintance with many of the words which he uses;' and the same objection makes it a presumption in you to suppose that you can admire him. (Macdonald, p. 121)

Before the essay ends, Lamb comes again to the subject of the Quakers, telling a delightful story of three Quakers who refused to be cheated by an exorbitant landlady. "So they all three quietly put up their silver, as did myself, and marched out of the room, the eldest and gravest going first, with myself closing up the rear, who thought I could not do better than follow the example of such grave and warrantable personages." (Macdonald, p.127)

### 13. Witches and other Night-fears.

Lamb begins this essay by a short discourse on

witchcraft. He thinks that perhaps our ancestors, who believed in witchcraft were not so very much more foolish than we, ourselves. The essay is chiefly a recollection of his childhood, with the dreams and visions that used to vex his childhood.

"Parents do not know what they do when they leave tender babes alone to go to sleep in the dark."

There is not much in the essay that deserves, or needs, careful study. It is merely another interesting piece of work such as only Lamb himself would think of writing.

14. My Relations gives a very good idea of Lamb's family, and their influence on his life. This is not altogether autobiographical, for Lamb does not stick to facts, but manufactures relationships to suit his own pleasure. He says "Brother, or sister I never had any--to know them." His sister Mary, and his brother John, he mentions under the head of cousins, "James and Bridget Elia."

The aunt, "a dear and good one," which Lamb mentions, is his "Aunt Hetty" of whom he speaks before in the essay, "Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago." In this essay he makes no mention of his father and mother. The most of the space is devoted to an account of "Aunt Hetty" and "James Elia."

"With some little asperities in her constitution--she was a steadfast, friendly being, and a fine old Christian.-- The only secular employment I remember to have seen her engaged in, was the splitting of French beans, and dropping

them into a China basin of fair water." (ed. Macdonald, p. 140)

Speaking of "James," he says: "His youth was fiery, glowing, tempestuous--and in age he discovereth no symptom of cooling." (ed. Macdonald, p. 143.)

15. Mackery End in Hertfordshire. This essay also deals with Lamb's family, being chiefly given up to "Bridget Elia." This is the highest tribute which he pays to his faithful sister Mary, who was to him a second mother, after the terrible tragedy which deprived him of that parent.

"In a season of distress, she is the truest comforter."

Mackery End, or Mackeral End, is an old farm house where Bridget and the small Elia used to go to visit their great-aunt. A description of this house, and of a visit here, with some account of the "Gladmans" to whom the children were related by the marriage of a Mr. Gladman to their grandmother's sister, ends the essay.

"When I forget all this, then may my country cousins forget me; and Bridget no more remember, that in the days of weakling infancy I was her tender charge--as I have been her care in foolish manhood since--in those pretty pastoral walks, long ago, about Mackery End, in Hertfordshire."

(ed. Macdonald, p. 156)

16. Modern Gallantry.

In this essay we find what a gentleman Lamb really was at heart. He condemns our modern system of politeness which gives to beauty and position that which it denies to poverty and old age. Lamb is not a woman's rights man. In

fact, he probably believed that in matters of intellect the average woman is below the average man. But he was a true gentleman and gave to woman her due deference.

"I shall be ever disposed to rank it among the salutary fictions of life, when in polite circles I shall see the same attentions paid to age as to youth, to homely features as to handsome, to coarse complexions as to clear--to the woman as she is a woman, not as she is a beauty, a fortune, or a title." (Macdonald, p. 159).

Lamb speaks, in the essay of "Joseph Paice, of Bread-street-hill," and his early love affair with Susan Winstanley, who died early in their courtship. He tells of a rebuke which Susan gave her lover for rebuking a poor little milliner for not delivering his cravats at the appointed hour.

"I wish the whole female world would entertain the same notion of these things that Miss Winstanley showed.--What a woman should demand of a man in courtship, or after it, is first--respect for her as she is a woman;--and next to that--to be respected by him above all other women.--Let her first lesson be--with sweet Susan Winstanley--to reverence her sex." (Macdonald, pp. 164-165.)

17. The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple was printed in the "London Magazine," September, 1827. This is one of the most famous of all the essays, rich in every kind of interest and literary charm. It is autobiographical, historical, legendary, and imaginary. It is not, however, pure fiction. Samuel Salt, Coventry, etc., are real men.

So it is with many of the characters mentioned. The names may be fictitious, but there is some real personage back of every one.

"Lovel," as I have said before, refers to Lamb's own father, while "R. N." stands for the name of Randal Norris who was the Sub-Treasurer and Librarian of the Inner Temple. Indeed Lamb was closely connected with this "Inner Temple" during the first thirty-eight years of his life. Here it was, in "Crown Office Row" that he was born and passed his early childhood; and here it was that he and his sister spent some time during the later part of their life.

He speaks much of his father in this essay. I have already quoted in the first division of my paper, some passages for the purpose of showing the respect and love which Lamb had for his father. Again he says: (Macdonald ed. p. 178). "Lovel was the liveliest little fellow breathing, had a face as gay as Garricks." The mention he makes here of his father is a much more humane and filial one than that which Professor Lucas quotes from his "Blank Verse" of 1798. (ed. Lucas, Vol. II, p. 368)

"One parent yet is left,--a wretched thing,  
A sad survivor of his buried wife.  
A palsy smitten, childish, old, old man,  
A semblance most forlorn of what he was--  
A merry, cheerful man."

18. Grace Before Meat was written in November, 1821. It is one of Lamb's own peculiar essays. It has apparently no deeper significance than is found in the subject itself. He says that, to his mind, before a meal is not a very appropriate occasion on which to utter thanks to the Creator.

"It is a confusion of purpose to mutter out praises from a mouth that waters." It would be better, he thinks, to wait until the appetite has been satisfied, when the mind can be calm, and in a fitting condition to hold communion with a gracious Provider.

Again, Lamb thinks that it is inconsistent to choose this event for the occasion of verbal praise, when so many other things that enter into our lives are equally deserving of praise. Why not, he asks, say grace before reading a favorite book, or starting out on a pleasant walk, or when enjoying a moonlight ramble? If grace must be said before meat rather than at any other time, why not follow the example of the Quakers? "I have always admired their silent grace."

So Lamb runs on in his charming, peculiar style to enlarge and dwell on this odd subject, one which he alone would have thought of selecting. It is in such short, homely topics that Lamb is most at home, and that the charm of his personality shows itself best.

19. My First Play was published in December, 1821. This is an interesting essay, probably largely autobiographical. To this play, which was "Artaxerxes," Lamb was taken by

"my godfather F." This was probably a Mr. Field, a distant relative of Lamb's mother. Here Lamb shows his power in the art of discursiveness. He devotes two whole pages to a description of this "F." (196-197) and then speaks of his second and third plays.

It is in this essay that Lamb makes one of his brief speeches concerning his mother. It is supposed that these references to her were so few as they were in order that the sensitive mind of Mary might not be made to dwell on the terrible family catastrophe in which she was so deeply concerned. He says here:-- "I reposed my shut eyes in a sort of resignation upon the maternal lap." (ed. Lucas, Vol.II, p. 98)

20. Dream-Children--a Reverie, published in January, 1822, is considered by many critics as the most beautiful piece of work which Lamb has ever written. It was written when the author was in dejection over the death of his brother John.

"a deadness to everything."

It was natural that in such a mood as this, which was tender, not bitter, that Lamb's mind should revert to other griefs and disappointments, especially for his early love. The reader feels while reading this essay as if he had trespassed upon the sacredness of a locked door; and unbidden entered and read the secrets of a human soul.

This is not the only place where Lamb speaks of "Alice W.----." Just who this loved one was, if she really



existed, is a question on which all are not agreed. It is certain, however, these points ought to be decided, that "Alice W-----" was the ideal of all that was pure, lovely and good, to Lamb's mind. Of Lamb's real love affair, nothing is really known. Alfred Ainger (Eng. Men of Letters) thinks that "Alice" may be a name applied to an Ann Simmons. There is ground for this belief, especially as Lamb speaks of his Alice as married to "Bartrum."

"The children of Alice call Bartrum father," and Ann Simmons was actually married to a man named "Bartram."

But however true may be the auto-biographical allusions made here, the fact that Lamb had such dreams adds another touch to that rare, beautiful, spiritual personality. There is no bitterness in the awakening, only a touch of tender sadness, that marks most of his reflective work.

"We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all.--We are nothing, less than nothing, and dreams."  
(ed. Lucas, Vol. II, p. 103)

Just as pathetic are the references he makes to his grief for his brother.

"I missed him all day long, and knew not till then how I had loved him." (ib.)

Again in closing, when the awakening from the "dream" comes, he returns again to the memory of this loved brother. He tells us that he awoke to find--"the faithful Bridget unchanged by my side--but John L. was gone forever." (ib.)

21. Distant Correspondents, published March, 1822, is written in Lamb's usual witty style. It has as its heading, the following; "In a letter to B. F., Esq. at Sydney, New South Wales." B. F. is thought by Macdonald (p. 210) and by Lucas (p. 379) to refer to Barron Field, a son of Henry Field, apothecary to Christ's Hospital. This Field was associated with Lamb first on Leigh Hunt's "Reflector," and in the same number of the "London Magazine" in which this essay appeared, was found the account of Field's voyage to New South Wales.

In this essay we find much that is general and vague, much that is discursive, but on the whole it is pleasant to read. "Epistolatory matter" he tells us at the beginning, "usually compriseth three topics; news, sentiment, and puns."

One thing particularly interesting about this essay is the mention of "Hare Court." From 1809 to 1817 the Lambs lived at 4 Inner Temple Lane. We find in a letter to Coleridge written in June, 1809, these words:--

"The rooms are delicious, and the best look backwards into Hare Court, where there is a pump always going. Hare Court trees come in at the window, so that it's like living in a garden." (ed. Lucas, Vol. II, p. 380.)

That Lamb was not always careful about his literary references, we know, and we find an illustration of this lack of care in this essay. (Lucas, p. 108). Lamb quotes from *Lycidas* the following:

"Aye me! while thee the seas and sounding shores  
Hold far away."

In reality the quotation should be as follows:

"Ay me! whilst thee the shores and sounding seas  
Wash far away."

The ending of the essay is characteristic of Lamb. He always manages to bring in some touch of humor mingled with his droll pathos; and this we find in the closing sentences.

"Formerly, I thought that death was wearing out,--I stood ramparted about with so many healthy friends. The departure of J. W., (his old schoolfellow, James White) two springs back, corrected my delusion. Since then the old divorcer has been busy. If you do not make haste to return, there will be little left to greet you, of me, or mine."  
(ed. Lucas, Vol. II, p. 108.)

22. Praise of Chimney Sweepers. May, 1822.

Another essay which reflects much of Lamb's personality is the next in order of consideration, "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers." This essay has been called "a peculiarly Elian essay." It is one of the most discursive in the volume. For example one would scarcely expect to find in an essay under this head such a sentence as we find on page 223.

(ed. Macdonald) "Every pair of rosy lips (the ladies must pardon me) is a casket presumably holding such jewels; but methinks, they should take leave to 'air' themselves as frugally as possible."

Perhaps nowhere does Lamb show his sympathy for all that is deserving of sympathy more strongly than in this essay. There was so much of the child in Lamb's nature that his heart went out to these "small gentry" as no one else's could. With what delightful skill he tells the story of the little sweep who was found asleep in a duke's bed!

"A high instinct was at work in the case.---Doubtless this young nobleman (for such my mind misgives me that he must be) was allured by some memory, not amounting to full consciousness, of his condition in infancy, when he was used to be lapt by his mother, or his nurse, in just such sheets as he there found.---By no other theory,-----can I explain a deed so venturous, and, indeed, upon any other system, so indecorous, in this tender but unseasonable, sleeper." (ed. Lucas, Vol. 88, p.112)

23. A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis appeared June, 1822. It owed its origin to a "Society for the Suppression of Mendicity" whose secretary, W. H. Bodkin was very active in his denunciation of impostors. At this time, Lamb, in his essay, undertakes to show that perhaps there may be something said against the zeal of Mr. Bodkin as a representative of the principle of the Society.

We find more of stateliness here than in most of Lamb's essays, But great smoothness of style. Lamb starts out with a style that is cold and unfeeling, at first glance, but it grows more humane and more "Elia" as it proceeds. Thus we find near the beginning of the essay:--

"I do not approve of this wholesale going to work, this impertinent crusade, or bellum ad exterminationem, proclaimed against a species." (Lucas, p. 114.)

Farther on, he says: "Shut not thy purse-strings always against painted distress. Act a charity sometimes." (Lucas, p. 120)

24. A Dissertation upon Roast Pig. This essay, which appeared September, 1822, is perhaps the best known and most widely read of all the "Essays of Elia." The whole idea is a humorous, one may say, a nonsensical one. We feel almost ashamed for Lamb that he has taken his time, employed his talent in writing upon this most foolish subject. It is strange to what the essay owes its popularity, or at least, its fame.

It is based on an old Chinese joke supposed to have been told to Lamb by "my friend M." (presumably Mr. Manning, who contributed Chinese jokes to the "New Monthly Magazine.") After Lamb leaves the discussion on this main topic and begins to tell of an incident of his childhood, we feel again the charm of his personality. It is the paragraph beginning: "I remember a touch of conscience in this kind at school." (Lucas, p. 125.)

But the "Dissertation" has it seems to me, received an amount of praise greater than it deserves. There seems to be nothing deeper than the surface to give a dignity to the essay, and the customary charm of the ideas of "Elia" goes not make its usual appeal here.

25. A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behavior of Married People.

This is the earliest of the essays, having been printed first in "The Reflector" of 1811. The plan of the essay, or at least, the idea of it, must have been in his mind as early as 1805, for in that year we find him writing this concerning a certain Mrs. R.: "A good -natured woman though, which is as much as you can expect from a friend's wife, whom you got acquainted with as a bachelor." (Lucas, p.391)

The essay is not very long, but it is long enough to show a good many of Lamb's characteristics which he shows nowhere else. The humor of the essay is great, and we also find present a cynicism, and a tendency to go straight to the point, which we do not always see in Lamb. He states his view here without hesitation, with no beating around the bush.

"But what I complain of, is that they carry this preference so undisguisedly, they perk it up in the faces of us single people so shamelessly, you cannot be in their company a moment without being made to feel, by some indirect hint or open avowal, that you are not the object of the preference." (Lucas, p. 127.)

The last three essays in this volume, namely: "On Some of the Old Actors," "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," and "On the Acting of Munden," were originally included in one three-part essay, published in February, April, and October. They were, in the original form, all included under the one head of "The Old Actors." The essays

are of the shortest and most uninteresting. They deal only with the subjects suggested in the titles and are of the shortest and most uninteresting. They deal only with the subjects suggested in the titles and are the least discursive of all of the "Essays of Elia."

\* \* \* \* \*

So ends the volume, "The Essays of Elia." No style could lend itself more easily to such a variety of themes. Prepared to quote at his pleasure, susceptible to the influence of those who had gone before him, he was still independent, even of himself. He never put himself under the tyranny of anyone's style, not even his own. He was free to follow the impulse of the moment, moody, yet never bitter, changeable, yet never reckless, he appears at his best in the "Essays of Elia."



University of Kansas Libraries



3 3838 100532063